

64-83

Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the Sixties and Seventies

Leslie C. Jones

When the age-long slavery of woman shall have ended, when she will be able to live by and for herself; then man—hitherto abominable—having given her her freedom, she will be a poet too. Woman will discover the unknown. Will her world be different from ours? She will discover things that will be strange and unfathomable; repulsive and delicate. We shall take them from her and we shall understand them.

—Arthur Rimbaud¹

It was in this letter of 1871 to his friend Paul Demeny that Rimbaud predicted the inevitable appearance of women's poetry in a world dominated by men. Once liberated from male domination and allowed to live and think freely, woman would reveal through her poetry repulsive and delicate things unfathomable by man. Rimbaud saw woman as a diverse psychic being and seemingly admired her for her "otherness"; yet, aware of the confines of patriarchal society, he foresaw her emancipation not as a means for the enrichment of poetry by and for both sexes, but rather for the adoption of her sensibilities into a poetry, once and for always, dominated by man. The historical struggles of women against the patriarchal order have recently led to a breakdown of confidence in the legitimacy of this order and, consequently, in its master narrative.² This breakdown has, according to Alice Jardine, launched "a vast self-exploration, a questioning *and* turning back upon [women's] own discourse, in an attempt to create a new space or *spacing within themselves* for survivals... and this space has been coded as *feminine*, as *woman*."³ Within a patriarchal system, this space of the feminine is defined as "terrifying, monstrous... mad, unconscious, improper, unclean, non-sensical, oriental, profane."⁴ Jardine believes that with change as the ultimate goal, the "putting into discourse of 'woman,'" or *gynesis*, is "intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking."⁵ In

reviewing Jardine's list of spaces of the feminine, one is reminded of the abject as defined in the work of Julia Kristeva. For Kristeva, the abject "beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out," but "it is...not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."⁶ Jardine's construction of spaces of the feminine refers, in fact, to Kristeva's identification of space as feminine, and more specifically as the maternal body,⁷ as a "place of passage, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture.'"⁸ By linking Kristeva's notion of abjection with Jardine's description of "feminine" spaces, I do not want to simply equate abjection with the feminine, but rather to acknowledge how patriarchal notions of femininity have been adopted for transgressive means.⁹ For, as Kristeva asks, "does not the combat against the phallic sign and against an entire monological culture finally sink into the substantial cult of woman?"¹⁰ Here one must remark, however, that what connotes the "cult of woman" (or the "feminine") may have absolutely nothing to do with women; within a patriarchal society it connotes, rather, that which is not man. (For example, the "feminine" connotes the body, nature, passivity, amorphousness versus man's mind, culture, activity, form.) If one accepts, then, the transgressive to be feminine and strives for a situation where "everyone and everything becomes Woman—as a culture obsessively turns itself inside out—where does that leave women?"¹¹

The privileging of the feminine in a transgressive discourse by no means guarantees liberation. During the sixties and seventies, in the face of modernism, which privileged vision and the two-dimensional picture plane, transgressive art practice chose to explore viscerality and the language of the body in non-traditional forms and materials. An obvious gender bias becomes apparent, however, in an analysis of the critical responses to the work of women versus that of men. The art of men was lauded for its transgressive boldness. The art of women was restricted to a terminology that reinscribed patriarchal notions of femininity. The mapping of these notions of femininity onto woman has privileged woman's art practice by neglecting its creators' transgressive intentions as artists, as women, as subjects of their own discourse.

Gender bias in the interpretation of women's art is far from new.¹² Prior to the 1960s, the few women who had actually transgressed into the male-dominated world of making art had had no

choice but to work within the confines of modernism as delineated by male vision. The most prominent example is, of course, Georgia O'Keeffe. Anna Chave, in "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," points out the incongruities that arose in the reception and interpretation of O'Keeffe's works because the artist was a woman.¹³ O'Keeffe firmly denied any biological/erotic interpretation of her floral imagery as vaginal and by so doing denied her sex as an artist. It was an attempt to adopt a male position and thereby have her work evaluated equally. Despite such efforts, however, her art was still seen in relation to the stereotypes of femininity. According to Chave, it "was not described as the vision of someone with real, deeply felt desires," but as the vision of either the intuitive creature, quoting Paul Rosenfeld and Lewis Mumford, "well grounded in the earth," or the wanton creature who allowed men "to see the mysterious parting movement of petals under the rays of sudden fierce heat."¹⁴ Women artists in this period were forced to deny the presence of sexual/gendered imagery in their work if they wanted to be taken seriously.

It was not until the sixties and seventies, exactly that period when "the age-long slavery of woman" was being challenged, that women artists began to openly proclaim their difference from their male counterparts. The explicit gendering of the artist was a consequence of the demand by the women's movement for equal rights and for the endorsement of a distinct female voice. The movement's motto, "the personal is political," urged women to publicly assert their difference as a means to greater understanding and, ultimately, to unbiased recognition. In line with this feminist discourse, many women artists chose to engage in a strictly feminist art practice aimed at expressing their difference from men through visual imagery. When Judy Chicago proposed that "maybe the existing forms of art for the ideas men have had are inadequate for the ideas women have," she was promoting an art of difference.¹⁵ The initial source for "the ideas women have" were those practices that had made women different in the past, as well as what made them different physically—their bodies. For this reason, many women artists chose to valorize previously marginalized female art practices such as weaving, quilting, embroidery, and ceramics, as well as daily female activities—ironing, cooking, and cleaning. Many also adopted vaginal iconography as a means to uncover and celebrate the biological source of woman's difference.

Womanhouse, for example, a multimedia environment created in 1971 by the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, exposed the regular, but otherwise invisible, sites and activities of a woman's daily life. The program was headed by Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, and participating artists included Faith Wilding, Mira Schor, Sandra Orgel, Nancy Youdelman, Karen LeCocque, and Chris Rush. The environment comprised rooms and performances created by the individual artists. In *Menstruation Bathroom*, Judy Chicago installed a trash can overflowing with bloodied tampons and pads under a counter displaying a selection of all the "liberating" and "refreshing" accoutrements marketed for female consumption during "that time of the month." Chicago exposed the bloody reality of menstruation underneath the adman's pretty pastel packaging. But more important than her critique of the advertising industry and ultimate subversion of the patriarchal notion (or non-notion) of menstruation, was her use of the abject. The exhibition of menstrual blood threatens patriarchy with its fear of the maternal body. In discussing the work of Kristeva, Elizabeth Gross explains: "Horror of menstrual blood is a refusal to acknowledge the subject's corporeal link to the mother...It marks the site of an unspeakable and unpayable debt of life, of existence, that the subject (and culture) owes to the maternal body."¹⁶ In Kristeva's terms, Chicago uses "nature" to confront "culture" and thus disturbs identity, system, order.

In *Scrubbing*, a performance by Chris Rush, the artist scrubbed the floor on her hands and knees. *Scrubbing* confronted the viewer with the tedious nature of women's usually invisible daily work and exposed its hidden and abject status in relation to men's work. The artists of *Womanhouse* exteriorized the "feminine" spaces that were hidden and repressed by the patriarchal order as a means to revalorize the abjected position forced upon them and, ultimately, to reclaim the rights to their own existence. "By naming or speaking it, they can maintain an imperilled hold on the symbolic and a stable speaking position...To speak of the object is to protect oneself against it while at the same time relying on its energetic resources."¹⁷

Although bold and explicit in its subversive imagery, *Womanhouse* has remained marginal in the pages of art history. While women were free to proclaim their sexuality and difference

through their art practice, they were not free from the practice of critical legitimization, which demanded an interpretation based on the patriarchal concepts of woman as nature, woman as amorphous, woman as passive, etc. The interpretation of the work of women artists during this period suffered tremendously because critics and art historians chose either, as in the case of *Womanhouse*, to completely isolate the artists as feminists, thus disregarding their contributions, or, as we shall see, to interpret their works solely in terms of the concepts of femininity described above, so that all individuality was repressed.

This period of transgression and gendering in the arts corresponds to the emergence of Eccentric Abstraction and Anti-Form, concepts that privileged the amorphous and the visceral, and of Happenings, Body, and Performance Art, which privileged the use of the artist's own body. What these diverse practices had in common was a capacity to disturb viewers, to draw them "toward the place where meaning collapses"¹⁸ through the incorporation of untraditional substances, amorphous forms, and the artist's body itself. In the case of most artists, the intent was to shock, to repulse in order to blur the boundaries of propriety and social strictures imposed on art, on women, and on society as a whole. It is my intention to reexamine the artistic practice of women who, during this period, incorporated abject materials or imagery; and, more important, to examine how this art was received relative to that of men also employing the abject.

By the early sixties, certain artists were already engaged in an art practice that privileged "feminine" forms and imagery. The works of Lee Bontecou, Yayoi Kusama, and Claes Oldenburg represent highly influential precedents for the development of Eccentric Abstraction and Anti-Form.

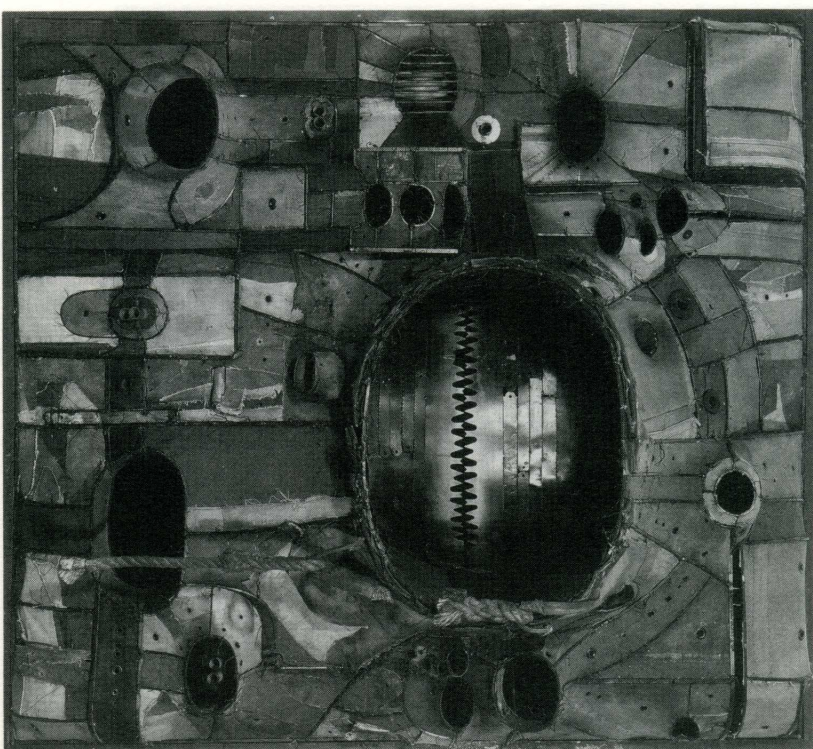
Lee Bontecou's *Untitled*, 1961, for example, incorporates vaginal imagery, as do many of her related constructions. Made of worn-out conveyor belts, airplane parts, and saws—materials recycled from the industrial power structure—they seemed to be empowering representations of the female sex. The surfaces project two to three feet into the viewer's space and are punctured with craters, some of them dark and seemingly bottomless voids which draw you in, seduce you, while others are barred with menacing saw teeth, *vagina dentata*. These works are at once

threatening and seductive; two seemingly opposite characteristics whose integration disturbs the viewer. "The fundamental approach is based on a principle of attraction-repulsion; each attack encompasses at the same time a retreat..."¹⁹ To be at once attracted and repulsed indicates the presence of the abject, for ambiguity is a state which does not answer to system or rules. In reference to the maternal body, the vagina represents the literal "border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain."²⁰ Bold and disruptive, Bontecou's constructions confronted patriarchal notions of woman as soft and passive.

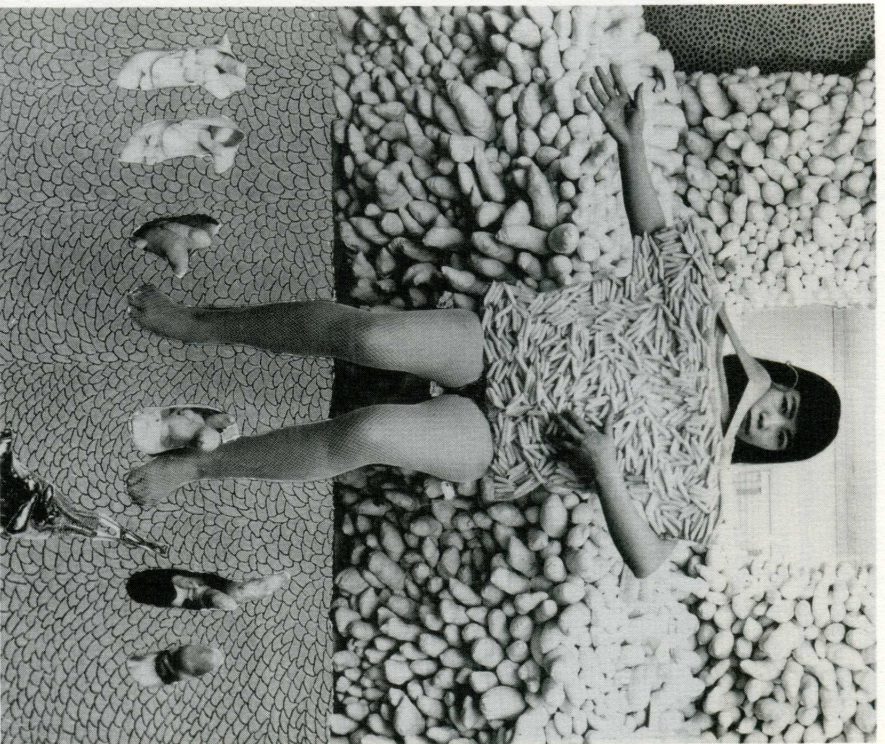
Although aggressive in its feminine imagery, Bontecou's constructions were highly acclaimed by male and female critics alike, who championed her work along with that of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. In 1964, Donald Judd declared Bontecou to be "one of the best artists working anywhere." For Judd and other critics of Greenbergian aesthetics, Bontecou's constructions of residual industrial materials represented ideal objects in the argument against the two-dimensional limitations of modernism: "Rather than inducing idealization and generalization and being allusive, the object excludes. It is actual and specific and is experienced as an object. It is a minatory object, seemingly capable of firing or swallowing."²¹ While Judd acknowledges the aggressive voids in Bontecou's work, he ultimately concludes that "the black hole does not allude to a black hole; it is one."²² Judd supports Bontecou's work in terms of his own notion of "specific objects," developed in an essay of the same name, which advocated a three-dimensional art practice situated formally between painting and sculpture.

For a brief period in the early sixties, Bontecou was accepted because her art fit in with a male-dominated discourse. Her constructions were discussed as "specific objects," or as "icons of industrialism, mechanical power, thrust, propulsion"²³—an emphasis belied by the overt vaginal iconography and the artist's process of sewing together the canvas patches for her constructions. As Lucy Lippard later observed, "one realized how much the earlier work, which had seemed so bold in its 'femaleness,' had in fact been confined by the rules of the art society in which it was understood."²⁴

At the same moment, the trace of a sewn stitch in the work of a male artist, namely Claes Oldenburg, became the focus of



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961, 1961



Yayoi Kusama, photo-collage of "The Driving Image Show,"
Castellane Gallery, New York, 1964

critical attention and proceeded to revolutionize art practice. (Although it was, in fact, Pat Oldenburg, the artist's wife, who did the actual sewing of his soft sculptures.) Whether in terms of sewing, softening, or sensualizing, Oldenburg was clearly concerned with feminizing his forms as a transgressive practice in his art. "It is important," he stated, "to operate out of the forces in us, forces and counterforces and not to be afraid to use them. Just now I am indulging my femininity."²⁵ Because vision has often been privileged as the superior sense in modernism and therefore

constitutive of the male subject, the experience of the other senses of the body has been denigrated and relegated to the realm of the feminine. Oldenburg adopts the language of the body "to offset the tendency to vagueness and abstraction. To remind people of practical activity, to suggest the senses and not escape from the senses, to substitute flesh and blood for paint."²⁶ Oldenburg's soft sculptures, such as *Soft Toilet* (1966; p. 10), testify to his "desire for every kind of contact sensation for his sculpture (eating, touching, sitting on, caressing)...visceratonic impulses."²⁷ Oldenburg's success in the manipulation of amorphous forms needs no testimony. As we shall see, however, the exploration of "feminine" spaces in the art practice of men was received quite differently from that in the work of women.

Yayoi Kusama, like Bontecou and unlike Oldenburg, was rarely acknowledged for the sewing of her soft sculptures. For Kusama, who claims to have been the first to make sewing machine sculpture, this was a grave oversight.²⁸ The act of sewing, stitching, or knitting in Kusama's work signified the repetitive and monotonous tasks performed by women on a daily basis, and has been a figural reference in her work since her *Infinity Paintings* of the late 1950s. Kusama's sewing machine "protuberances"—pieces of material sewn into narrow pouches and stuffed into phallic shapes—have often been likened to the soft sculptures of Oldenburg. But even though both artists soften quotidian objects, the majority of Kusama's objects are more specifically concerned with the everyday life of women. Moreover, the furniture, mixing bowls, high-heeled shoes, and frying pans that she softens and envelops with protuberances appear less affable than Oldenburg's sculptures and more as if diseased with phallic fungi. The tumorous sculptures infect and spread over the object, rendering it useless for sitting, eating, walking, whatever.

Critics have attempted to "disinfect" the malignant nature of Kusama's work by interpreting it as evocative of "elemental feelings"²⁹ and the "eternal processes of growth and generation in nature."³⁰ Such interpretations clearly deny the threat of disease and reveal society's fear of contamination and, more broadly, of the unclean and the improper. Kusama's use of wild, spreading protuberances could be associated with her later use of polka dots: "red polka dots...suggest spots like the spots of disease. This disease is the attitude of the human race toward sex, which is sick.

I used mirrors to show that the problem goes on and on without stopping.”³¹ The problem that goes “on and on without stopping” is, fundamentally, the abject. Like the threat of disease, it is ever-present. “A certain ‘ego’ that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”³²

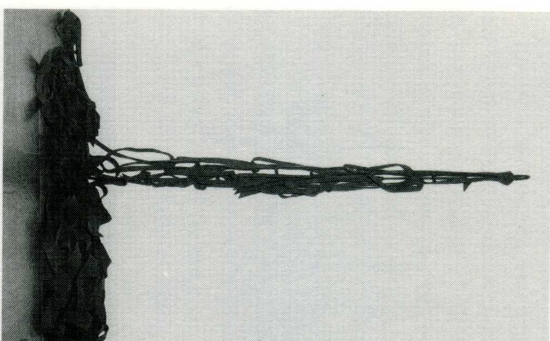
The 1966 “Eccentric Abstraction” exhibition, curated by Lucy Lippard for the Fischbach Gallery, New York, brought together artists “allied to the non-formal tradition devoted to opening up new areas of materials, shape, color and sensuous experience.”³³ Lippard referred to the Freudian concept of “body ego” in describing the viewer’s response to the work: “Body ego can be experienced two ways: first through appeal, the desire to caress, to be caught up in the feel and rhythms of a work; second, through repulsion, the immediate reaction against certain forms and surfaces which take longer to comprehend.”³⁴ The opposing reactions of repulsion and desire are also indicative of the state of abjection, the state of the ambiguous where all “meaning collapses.” According to Lippard, the experience provoked “giggles of uneasiness and perhaps even awe, like the giggles provoked by aspects of death, love, sex, excretion, any natural function too naturally exposed.”³⁵ In the work of Kristeva, these “aspects” are theorized as “dark revolts of being,” the abject.³⁶

In 1968, two years after the “Eccentric Abstraction” exhibition, Robert Morris published “Anti-Form,” an influential essay that defined the radical practice of process-oriented art in opposition to the idealizing notions of art based on form, or art for art’s sake.³⁷ He was responding to Herbert Marcuse’s proposition that “art remains alien to the revolutionary praxis by virtue of the artist’s commitment to Form: Form as art’s own reality, as *die Sache selbst*.”³⁸

Morris rallied for a revolutionary art practice based on Anti-Form through a “disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders.”³⁹ Such a disengagement would dictate the exclusion of the durable materials and geometric morphology that had dominated Western art practice. Morris, like Lippard, cites Oldenburg as a precursor in the use of alternative materials and forms. Oldenburg’s soft materials make process visible. “The focus on

matter and gravity as means results in forms which were not projected in advance.”⁴⁰

In *Felt* (1967–68), Morris attaches strips of thick felt to a single point on the wall so that they limply cascade into a random pool on the gallery floor. Removing the material and structural support, he allows gravity to determine the form of the object. In the words of one critic, “they are not ‘upright,’ ‘straight,’ ‘firm,’ or ‘strong’....[but] they could be called ‘social,’ suggesting as they startlingly do, comfort and invitation. They are extremely tactile. They *want* to be

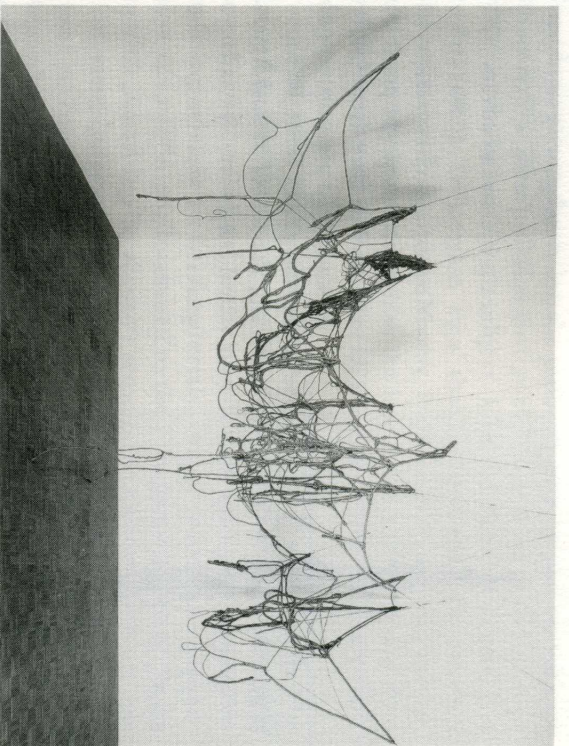


Robert Morris, *Felt*, 1967–68

touched.”⁴¹ Other critics found Morris’ works to have “gone soft”;⁴² and later they were described as “unmistakably vaginal.”⁴³ Anti-Form, with its emphasis on process and the natural and unpredictable orientation of the actual materials, confronted the senses. “Under the predominance of rationalism,” Marcuse wrote, “the cognitive function of sensuousness has been constantly minimized....Sensuousness, as the ‘lower’ and even ‘lowest’ faculty,” was thus an ideal means of representation to challenge the modernist art practice based on vision.⁴⁴ Morris, like Oldenburg, chose to explore “feminine” spaces, to “indulge his femininity” as a transgressive means to counter modernism.

The work of Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Louise Bourgeois also explored “feminine” spaces. For these women, unlike their male counterparts, however, the process was regarded as stereotypically feminine. Critics received it as a natural phenomenon rather than as a willed intellectual strategy.

The early sculptural work of Eva Hesse, although based on Minimalist precepts, softened forms through the sensual manipulation of non-traditional substances such as latex, plastic, rope, and



Eva Hesse, *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, 1969-70

fiberglass. By 1970, with *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, however, Hesse had left Minimalism as far behind as had Morris with his felt pieces. She had earlier turned away from painting and the predominant modernist aesthetic in an exploration of the "boundary that lies between the institutions of painting and sculpture."⁴⁵ Despite Hesse's obvious dialogue with and elaboration on the art discourse of her day, her work's amorphous and often scattered forms led critics to narrowly interpret it as "intuitive rather than intellectual."⁴⁶ The gender bias of the interpretation is made clear when, in describing the soft sculptures of Oldenburg in the preceding paragraph, the critic states that "the endless alteration of form... reach[es] both the subjective and objective, sensuous and intellectual equipment of the viewer."⁴⁷ Later critics, too, perhaps in response to Hesse's traumatic biography, have emphasized the purely expressionistic quality in her work. In 1979, Rosalind Krauss described Hesse's art as "a reflection of the self as unmediated, pre-formalized origin, as the purest and most authentic source of feeling."⁴⁸ And as recently as 1992, Anna Chave has gone so far to interpret Hesse's work as rife with disease, as a personal

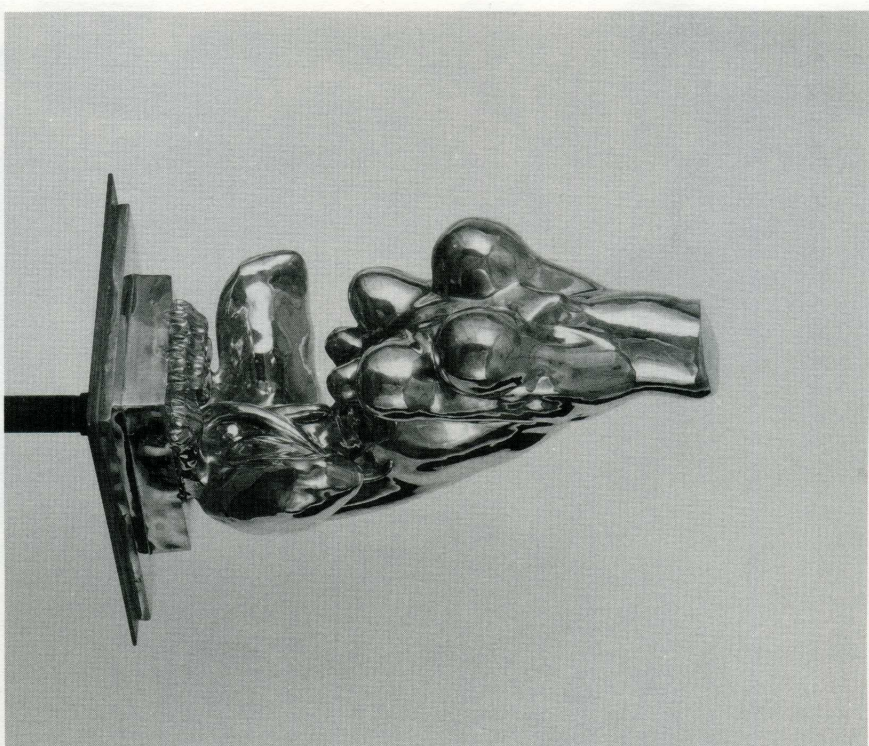
expression of her lifelong battle with illness: "The noisome scent of decay which seems to emanate from Hesse's sculpture...plays on our fears of contamination and dissolution, on our gnawing sense of our own mortality."⁴⁹ While Chave perceives Hesse's work in terms of the abject, she believes it to have been permeated by the artist's self-definition as a sick, decomposing, abject being. Such biographical and essentializing notions completely disregard Hesse's work as a conscious and intellectual art practice.

In a similar manner, Lynda Benglis' art has often been exclusively discussed in terms of patriarchal notions of femininity. Benglis' brown polyurethane foam sculptures ooze out of the gallery walls and freeze suspended just inches above the gallery floor, simultaneously evoking sensations of awe and disgust. While reminiscent of molten lava and the mysterious generative powers of nature, these sculptures are clearly scatological. Thomas B. Hess, however, equated Benglis with a different force of nature: "Nature can change states—freeze water, melt rocks; Benglis, too, can congeal or liquefy matter...." ⁵⁰ And Klaus Kertess described her as "intensely concerned with process and with images. Excessive images. Images involved with organic, liquid phenomena (the ocean, body fluids and flow). Images involved with flesh and physicality...Images that openly declare a very strong female sensuality...." ⁵¹ As with the work of Kusama, critics have attempted to confine the threatening readings of Benglis' work to the safe realms of nature and feminine excess. They ignore its obvious scatology, which in fact is confrontational, challenging us with the fear of excrement, with "the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death."⁵²

As excrement threatens all social beings from without, the fluids issuing from the vagina threaten sexual identity from within. In *Travel Agent* (1966/1977-78; p. 13), the viewer is confronted with a distinctly vaginal icon that valorizes as well as threatens. Benglis' icon is threatening not only because it uncovers patriarchy's historical concealment and thus domination of female sexuality, but because it is aroused. The tender surface of dripping wax clearly eroticizes the icon. In fact, Benglis has discussed the creation of the wax paintings, the steady stroking of wax over masonite, as "masturbating in [her] studio," ⁵³ a clear reclamation of a woman's right to her own sexual pleasure.

As early as the 1940s, Louise Bourgeois was working with amorphous and biomorphic forms that often suggested female and/or male genitalia. But it was not until the 1960s, when amorphousness and the visceral had been legitimated by male art practice, that she began to receive critical recognition. That recognition, however, was concentrated on references to nature and fertility. One critic described Bourgeois' work as "evocative of a world of forests, of hills, oceans, caves, hollow echoes of the sound of waves...created by a strikingly fertile imagination."⁵⁴ William Rubin called *Molotov Cocktail* (1968) "a pregnancy" and noted that when surrounded by Bourgeois' work "we are in the world of germination and eclosion—the robust sexuality of things under and upon the earth."⁵⁵ Clearly, the "robust sexuality" is often human sexuality, and Rubin comes to fear that "when themes of sexuality are pressed too literally, a set of emotions interposes itself between the viewer and the work in a manner uncondusive to aesthetic contemplation."⁵⁶ Rubin represents patriarchal society and its institutions' fear of contamination; Bourgeois' bold sexual imagery threatens because it is not "savored and absorbed, like the sexuality of Brancusi and Arp."⁵⁷ The voice of patriarchy could not be clearer; human sexuality must be bordered up and sublimated. The work of Bourgeois "talks about things we don't want talked about, acknowledges forces we don't want broadcast loudly, and certainly not let loose."⁵⁸ It talks about the abject.

Bourgeois' forms are suggestive of the body, both male and female, and its interior spaces. The symbolic merging of the male and female in the fusing of breast and/or vagina and penis is a theme that began in Bourgeois' totemic wood figures of the 1940s and has continued in more recent work, such as *Nature Study* (1984), where the squatting dog/demon betrays both swelling breasts and a penis. Bourgeois' latex pieces of the 1960s evoke associations with living flesh, more precisely with the interior side of flesh, as within a mouth or vagina. The viewer is threatened by these mutations and interior spaces because they are at once recognizable and foreign, attractive and repulsive. The art of Louise Bourgeois, perhaps like that of no other artist working in the sixties and seventies, continues to transgress by its insistence on representing the visceral and sexual body in the face of patriarchal demands for sublimation. In response to *Nature Study*,



Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study*, 1984. Bronze, 30 x 14 1/2 x 19 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 84.42

for example, one critic noted how it “makes you avert your gaze; you turn away with a sickened feeling...to meet another pair of staring eyes, emblematic of Bourgeois’ unflinchingness.”⁵⁹

The transgression of order through the use of the abject was also demonstrated in the sixties Happenings and Body Art and in Performance Art of the next decade. All three practices used the human body as the medium in choreographed or semi-choreographed events. Happenings and Body Art were dominated by men, but during this same period the innovative dance of Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti, the Fluxus activities of Yoko Ono and Alison Knowles, and the music of Charlotte Moorman were preparing the way for the great surge of women performance artists in the 1970s.

Carolee Schneemann was one of the few women to actively engage in the conception of Happenings (or Kinetic Theater, as she called it) and was most likely the first to incorporate her own nude body into her work. In discussing the development of *Eye Body* (1963), Schneemann emphasized how the decision to use her own body represented empowerment: “I wanted my actual body to be combined with the work as an integral material....Covered in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, plastic, I establish my body as visual territory. Not only am I an image maker, but I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with.”⁶⁰ Schneemann was well aware of the taboos associated with the nude female body and chose to expose them as a means of transgressing gender-specific norms: “In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-construction was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved *enough* like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by men.”⁶¹ Schneemann offered her self-stripped, self-emblazoned body as a banner for other women in their struggle to reclaim their bodies and their identities.

In the following year, Schneemann turned to the taboo subject of human sensuality. She described her most famous (or infamous) theater piece, *Meat Joy* (1964), as “an exuberant sensory celebration of the flesh.”⁶² To arrive at such a state of abandon, she introduced abject materials into the choreography. Nude participants frolicked, rolled around, and danced in piles of paper scrap, gradually other substances such as wet paint, raw fish, chickens,



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964 performance at Judson Church, New York



Hannah Wilke, from the S.O.S. (*Sanification Object Series*), 1974. One of 35 black-and-white photographs from *Masturbation Box*, 6 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

and sausages were added to the writhing mass of bodies, resulting in an erotic ritual, both sensual and repellent. It was an experiment in pushing the limits of sensuality—pushing them to the frontier of the disgusting in the hope of making the disgusting pleasurable. The goal was to “dislocate, compound and engage our senses, expanding them into unknown and unpredictable relationships.”⁶³ Schneemann wanted these new relationships to question and ultimately destroy social taboos.

By the early 1970s, at the height of the women’s movement, many more women artists found Body and Performance Art—the literal use of one’s own body—to be an ideal means of self-exploration and self-expression. A woman artist’s use of her own nude body, however, ignited controversy by emphasizing the social taboos that continued to surround representation of the female sex. In the same period, “Bruce Nauman was ‘Thighing,’ Vito Acconci was masturbating, and Barry Le Va was slamming into walls.”⁶⁴ Men were free to manipulate their bodies as they pleased, women were not; the great irony being that certain male artists, among them Vito Acconci, had attempted to “become” women by altering their bodies in their art practice. In *Conversations* (1971), for example, Acconci burned the hair off his chest, tried to develop female breasts by pulling on his own, and finally hid his penis between his legs.⁶⁵ Although his engagement in transgressive femininity and his attempt to “become” a woman was perceived as a valid art practice, body manipulations by Hannah Wilke and Lynda Benglis were deemed narcissistic or pornographic.

Wilke offered the viewer only blemished or demeaning images of herself. The constant accusations of narcissism and

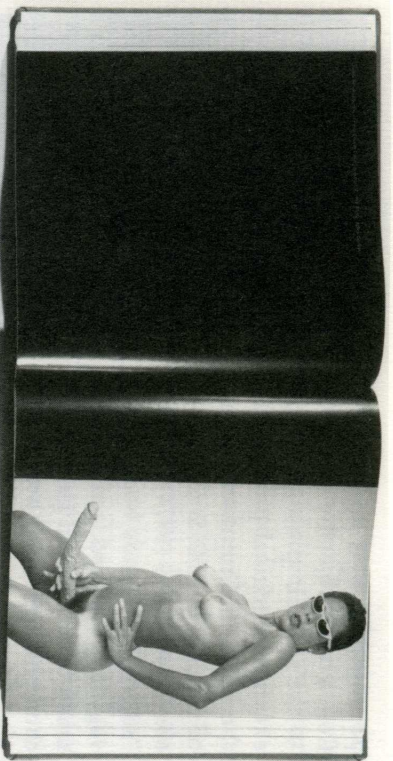
pornography were unjustified: from a more objective vantage, Wilke’s work presented an extremely critical picture of the status and representation of women. In S.O.S. (*Sanification Object Series*) (1974), Wilke “scarred” her nude body with vaginally shaped sculptures made from chewed gum, and then photographed herself in poses that mock those of magazine models. The effect of these scars on the viewer is not unlike that of Cindy Sherman’s dismembered mannequins, as in *Untitled* (1992; p. 64):

“Automatic scopophilic consumption, whether narcissistic or voyeuristic, is interrupted. By rendering the body problematic, and exposing what is conventionally hidden, Sherman infuses the desirous look with a sense of dread and dis-ease.”⁶⁶ Two decades earlier, Wilke, too, had exposed what was conventionally hidden—the vagina—and she did it with a non-art medium—chewing gum. The proliferation of vagina gums was Wilke’s attempt to make visible the “invisible” sex, reinstating visually the presence of woman so long repressed within patriarchal society. As Debra Wacks observed, Wilke “embraces and builds upon the connotations that are associated with chewing gum.... For gum is sticky and messy, and chewing gum is often considered a disgusting, even obsessive habit.”⁶⁷ The incorporation of such an abject substance as chewed gum not only subverts the notion of high art materials, but also sensualizes the experience: the chewing gum is in fact worked into its malleable state by the spectators, who thus partake in the taste, smell, and sound of the creative process.

No artist was more candid in her criticism of the representation of women than May Wilson. In her “ridiculous portraits,”⁶⁸ the artist pasted her own face—contorted into a variety of hideous and comical expressions—onto postcard images of Victorian ladies, the Madonna, and classical nudes. Wilson “defiled” these images in order to parody and thus deconstruct



May Wilson, artist-produced postcard, c. 1970



Lynda Benglis, advertisement in *Artforum*, 1974

patriarchal notions of the ideal woman. The obscurity of her work testifies to the art world's obliviousness to an important feminist critique on society's representation of women, twenty years before Cindy Sherman.

Lynda Benglis' gallery advertisement for *Artforum* in November 1974 was a bold attempt to confront the issue of gender bias in the art world. In the self-conceived photograph, Benglis slicks up her nude body, places a larger-than-life dildo at her groin, and with one hand on her hip turns belligerently to confront the viewer. According to Benglis, her "intention was to mock the idea of having to take sexual sides—to be either a male artist or a female."⁶⁹ In the controversy that ensued, Benglis was accused of narcissism, pornography, and penis envy. Her critique of gender bias in the art world was lost on critics who failed to see past a nude female body. According to one, "Benglis' sexual photographs are not to be confused with Vito Acconci's performances on erotic themes.... Superficially, Benglis' work reveals the tasteful, the glossy, and the narcissistic, while Acconci's secret sexual systems are more populist, and tend toward the squalid, the exorcistic, and the puritanical."⁷⁰ This bias becomes even clearer when compared to the perhaps less aggressive yet equally threatening photo of Robert Morris in S&M gear, used as a poster for his April 1974 exhibition at Castelli/Sonnabend Galleries. Jeremy

Gilbert-Rolfe observed that the poster was an "ironic encapsulation of [Morris'] own position in contemporary art."⁷¹ And what about the position of the artist if she is a woman? Is not Benglis' image an "ironic encapsulation" of the state of woman as an artist in a male-dominated art world?

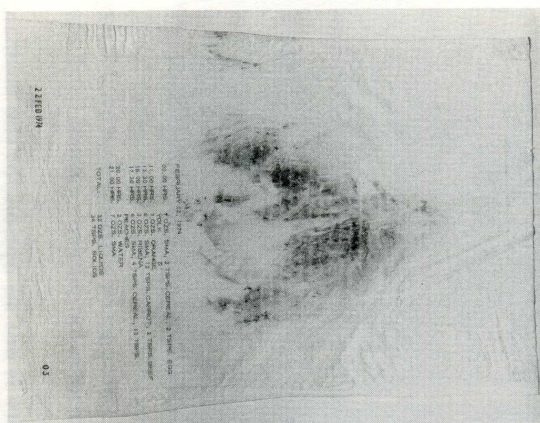
Clearly, this world, by accusing women artists like Schneemann, Wilke, and Benglis of narcissism and pornography has pre-empted a more legitimate association of their work with the abject. Similarly, Kusama, Hesse, Bourgeois, and Benglis again, working in abject materials and imagery that have a bold transgressive force, were often subjected to one-dimensional interpretations that referred to nature and emotional excess. For male artists like Oldenburg, Morris, and Acconci, on the other hand, the incorporation of abject materials or imagery—what I have termed the practice of transgressive femininity—earned them the accolade of rebel-innovator.

Transgressive femininity is not an option for the woman artist. As I said earlier, the privileging of the feminine in a transgressive discourse by no means guarantees liberation. Rather, as in the art practice of the sixties and seventies, women are presumptuously categorized and thereby rendered mute and invisible as individuals. In "Femininity as Mas(s)querade," Tania Modleski concludes: "Not the least of the problems involved in equating the masses and mass culture [or in our case, nature and the body] with the feminine is that it becomes much more difficult for women to interrogate their role within that culture."⁷² Nor is transgressive masculinity an option for the woman artist. Such a concept was boldly parodied by Benglis. By appropriating an obviously *faux* phalllus, Benglis likened the notion of a woman obtaining power or legitimacy to that of a man having a 24-inch penis.

In the 1970s, a feminist art practice emerged that attempted to deconstruct the patriarchal notions of femininity through the use of theory. Of distinct note in this practice is the absence of a direct representation of the female body. In *Post-Partum Document* (1974-79), for example, Mary Kelly uses Lacanian analysis to deconstruct patriarchal concepts of motherhood. In *Documentation I*, she deconstructs the notion of woman as nurturer. Rather than depict a mother feeding a child, Kelly juxtaposes feeding charts and Lacanian diagrams with stained diaper liners as a record of the nurturing procedure, the non-verbal mother/child means

Notes

- * I would like to thank Linda Nochlin and Mira Schor for sharing their thoughts on and enthusiasm for women's art practice of the sixties and seventies. Richard Meyer, Mignon Nixon, and Debra Wacks generously made their unpublished works available to me.
1. Arthur Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871, in Emd Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), pp. 124-25. The last clause reads in French "nous les prendrons, nous les comprendrons"; *comprendre* here seems better translated as to incorporate or encompass.
2. See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1979).
3. Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
6. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Honor: An Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2, 4.
7. According to Kristeva, *ibid.*, p. 10, "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separate from another body in order to be...."
8. Quoted in Jardine, *Gynesis*, p. 89.
9. The notion of woman as "other" and as a threatening and potentially revolutionary force within the hegemonic system has been the subject of much recent postmodern theory. See, for example, Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 44-64; Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen*, 27 (January-February 1986), pp. 44-71; Tania Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(que)querade," in *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 23-34; Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 213-29.
10. Quoted in Jardine, *Gynesis*, p. 11.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
12. For extensive treatment of gender bias in the history of art, see Linda Nochlin, *Woman, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988); and Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
13. Anna C. Chave, "O'Keefe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America*, 78 (January 1990), pp. 115-25, 177, 179.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 123.
15. Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1976), p. 6.
16. Elizabeth Gross, "The Body of Signification," in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 92.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
18. Kristeva, *Powers of Honor*, p. 2.
19. Annette Michelson, in Gillo Dorfles, Gérard Gasiot-Talbot, and Annette



Mary Kelly,
Prototype for Post-Partum
Document, Documentation I:
Analysed faecal stains and
feeding charts, 1974

of communication. The stain marks a successful response to the child's request for nourishment.

The work of artists like Mary Kelly set a precedent for another generation to pursue theoretically based art practices critical of the representation of women and notions of femininity. As recently as 1991, however, in her essay discussing the critical reception of the work of Cindy Sherman, Abigail Solomon-Godeau asks how "the work of a woman artist, whose work has long been preoccupied with constructions of femininity, is...textually dispatched with an exclamatory invocation to the masculine."⁷³ Solomon-Godeau is responding to the interpretation of Sherman's work as "humanistic" and concludes that "in ascending to that pantheon where, as we all know, genius has no gender, what gets deflected in the criticism, if not relegated to critical oblivion altogether, are all those elements in the work that constitute its difference."⁷⁴ Arthur Rimbaud's prophecy concerning women's contributions to poetry (and, in our case, art) still rings uncannily true: "We shall take them from her and we shall understand them." The adoption and consequent erasure of meaning in women's art continues to persist even today.

- Michelsson, *Lee Bontecou*, exh. cat. (Paris: Ilana Sonnabend Gallery, 1965).
20. Krsteva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 61.
21. Donald Judd, "In the Galleries: Lee Bontecou," *Arts Magazine*, 37 (January 1963), p. 44.
22. Donald Judd, "Lee Bontecou," *Arts Magazine*, 39 (April 1965), p. 20.
23. Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 378.
24. Lippard, *From the Center*, p. 79.
25. Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams, eds., *Store Days: Documents from the Store (1961) and Ray Gun Theater (1962)* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), p. 65.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
27. Harris Rosenstein, "Climbing Mt. Oldenburg," *Art News*, 64 (February 1966), p. 57.
28. Kusama's remark is cited in Alfred Carl, "Call Her Doty," *New York Sunday News*, August 13, 1967, p. 36.
29. Anita Feldman, "Something Rich and Strange," unidentified clipping, Yayoi Kusama artist's file, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
30. "Kusama: The First Obsessional Artist," unidentified typescript, Yayoi Kusama artist's file, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
31. Quoted in "Kusama's Show," *New York Post*, November 14, 1965.
32. Krsteva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.
33. Lucy R. Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," *Art International* (November 1966); reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, eds., *The New Sculpture 1967-75: Between Geometry and Gesture*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), p. 54.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
36. Krsteva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.
37. Robert Morris, "Anti Form," *Artforum*, 6 (April 1968), pp. 33-35.
38. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, quoted in Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989), p. 47.
39. Morris, "Anti Form," p. 35.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Ralph Pomerooy, "Soft Objects," *Arts Magazine*, 43 (March 1969), p. 48.
42. Grace Glueck, "A Feeling for Felt," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1968, p. 28.
43. Pepe Karmel, "The Evolution of the Felt Works," in Robert Morris: *The Felt Works*, exh. cat. (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1989), p. 57.
44. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, quoted in Berger, *Labyrinths*, p. 67.
45. Rosalind Krauss, "Eva Hesse," in *Eva Hesse: Sculpture*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1979).
46. Lucy R. Lippard, "An Impure Situation (New York and Philadelphia Letter)," *Art International*, 10 (May 1966), p. 63.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Krauss, "Eva Hesse."
49. Anna C. Chave, "Eva Hesse: A Girl Being a Sculpture," in Helen A. Cooper, ed., *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1992), p. 112.
50. Thomas B. Hess, "Abstract Acrylicism," *New York*, December 8, 1975, p. 114.
51. Klaus Kertess, "Foam Structures," *Artforum*, 10 (May 1972); reprinted in Armstrong and Marshall, *The New Sculpture*, p. 283.
52. Krsteva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 71.
53. Quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten, "Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture," *Artforum*, 13 (November 1974); reprinted in Armstrong and Marshall, *The New Sculpture*, p. 310. Benjamin Buchloh has suggested that Benglis' comment may also refer to Bruce Nauman's films of the late 1960s, which recorded activities in his studio such as breathing, tossing a ball, clapping, or painting his testicles black.
54. Daniel Robbins, "Sculpture by Louise Bourgeois," *Art International*, 8 (October 1964), pp. 30, 31.
55. William S. Rubin, "Some Reflections Prompted by the Recent Work of Louise Bourgeois," *Art International*, 13 (April 1969), p. 17.
56. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
58. Donald Kuspit, "Louise Bourgeois: Where Angels Fear to Tread," *Artforum*, 25 (March 1987), p. 115.
59. Jeanne Silverthorne, "Reviews: Louise Bourgeois," *Artforum*, 22 (December 1984), p. 81.
60. Carolee Schneemann, "Eye Body," in Bruce McPherson, ed., *More Than Meat Joy: Carolee Schneemann* (New Paltz, New York: Documentext, 1979), p. 52.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Quoted in "Carolee Schneemann: Image as Process," *Creative Camera*, no. 76 (October 1970), p. 304.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Lippard, *From the Center*, p. 125.
65. Vito Acconci, "Drifts and Conversions," *Avantgarde*, no. 2 (Winter 1971), pp. 82-95.
66. Jan Avgikos, "Cindy Sherman: Burning Down the House," *Artforum*, 38 (January 1993), p. 78.
67. Debra Wacks, "Feminism/Humanism in Hannah Wilke's S.O.S.—*Starification Object Series*," unpublished paper, New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, 1992, p. 7.
68. The term "ridiculous portraits" comes from the 1990 exhibition "May Wilson: The New York Years, Assemblage & Ridiculous Portraits" at Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York.
69. Quoted in Susan Krane, *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures*, exh. cat. (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1990), p. 42.
70. Pincus-Witten, "Lynda Benglis," in Armstrong and Marshall, *The New Sculpture*, p. 312.
71. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Robert Morris: The Complication of Exhaustion," *Artforum*, 13 (September 1974), p. 44.
72. Modleski, "Femininity as Mas(s)querade," p. 34.
73. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman," *Parkett*, no. 29 (1991), p. 112.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 115.